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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HO CHI MINH CITY 000468

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TAGS: PHUM KIRF SOCI VM REFFREE HUMANR

SUBJECT: THE YIN AND YANG OF THE SEA STAR CATHOLIC SEMINARY

REF: 02 Ho Chi Minh City 1304

¶1. (SBU) Summary: The Ambassador met with Father Tran Thanh Phong, director of the Nha Trang Sea Star Seminary during a visit to Khanh Hoa province, May 15-17. During the discussion, which took place in a large, well-maintained reception hall, Father Phong was careful not to explicitly criticize the GVN, but he did comment that it might be difficult for Western logic to comprehend "the convolutedness" of the Seminary/Catholic Church's relationship with the Vietnamese Government. Father Phong painted a picture of a Catholic diocese that has made its peace with the GVN, reconciled to enjoying some freedoms while operating within certain restrictions. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Ambassador Raymond F. Burghardt and the Consul General met for over an hour with Father Tran Thanh Phong. Father Phong described the Sea Star Seminary as responsible for training priests for three dioceses: Nha Trang (Khanh Hoa province and Phan Rang in Ninh Thuan province); Buon Me Thuot (Dak Lak province and part of Binh Phuoc province); and Quy Nhon (Binh Dinh, Phu Yen, and Quang Ngai provinces). Six seminaries Q in Nha Trang, Hue, Hanoi, Thanh Hoa, Ho Chi Minh City, and Can Tho Q are officially recognized by the GVN. Nha Trang was recognized ten years ago. (Prior to 1975, the Sea Star Seminary was a minor one. The major seminaries were those in Dalat and Saigon.)

¶3. (SBU) According to Father Phong, Sea Star Seminary currently has 84 seminarians who follow a six-year course of study. Every two years, each diocese is permitted to select 10 candidates who have graduated from university. The "ideal" candidate is about 25 years-old, has a bachelor's degree, and gets the stamp of approval from the local People's Committee and Ministry of Public Security (MPS) for having a "sound mind" (here the priest smilingly tapped his head).

¶4. (SBU) The six-year training program includes two years of philosophy and four years of theology, as well as courses on politics and economics Q taught by professors assigned by the local authorities. There is about a ten percent drop out rate, but usually not due to a diagnosis of wrong-headedness by the MPS. The Ministry of Public Security and the local government make their appearance again at graduation, when they "check" the seminarians to ensure they are still of "sound mind."

¶5. (U) After graduation, the seminarians are usually assigned as assistants for a two-year internship to ordained priests. After a successful internship (and by that time, over the age of 30, the minimum age to become a priest in Vietnam), they are ordained. The diocese then decides which parish to send the newly-ordained priest to - as a junior priest, who will eventually take over as the full parish priest. There are currently 120 priests in the Nha Trang diocese, according to Father Phong, many of whom are old and infirm. "We need a younger generation," he emphasized. Since the Sea Star Seminary is limited in its intake of seminarians, Father Phong was asked whether any devout Catholics go overseas to pursue their theological studies. He noted that they could go overseas as regular students, but not as seminarians. Only priests who are trained and ordained in Vietnam can serve here.

¶6. (SBU) Father Phong said that he and the Seminary get along with the provincial government, but are required to get permission from the authorities whenever they wanted to travel or meet with outsiders Q including priests and believers from other towns and diocese. Local authorities must approve the Seminary's training curriculum, the professors/priests who will teach the classes, and their lesson plans. There have been no foreign priests as teachers; the Seminary has never asked for permission because it "knows the request will not be approved." (Post Note: Demonstrating that situations are relative and vary from province to province, it would appear Khanh Hoa province exercises stricter control over the Catholic Church than Ho Chi Minh City does. The Catholic hierarchy in HCMC generally travels unimpeded and simply notifies local authorities of their plans Q sometimes after the

fact. They also meet with ConGenoffs and other "outsiders" without asking permission. End note.)

17. (U) However, Sea Star Seminary has been able to send some faculty members to study in Rome, Paris, and the U.S. Right now, bioethics is a sensitive issue, and regional priests attended classes led by the Bishop of Can Tho earlier this month. In response to a question from the Ambassador, Father Phong indicated that the Seminar receives some financial assistance from Rome and its own parishioners. Individual overseas Vietnamese also donate, but on a case-by-case basis.

18. (SBU) During a brief tour of the Seminary, the Ambassador stopped by a darkened room with several computers. Father Phong explained that while seminarians have access to the Internet, they are forbidden by the provincial government to download any files. (Post Note: While we do not know specifically about the Catholic seminary in HCMC, in cities like HCMC and Danang, the internet cafes and universities can download from any website that is not firewalled by the government. End note.) The Sea Star Seminary itself is built on land granted to it in compensation for the old building (now a teachers' college) in a different location. Father Phong ruefully chuckled when he related that the local government said it was giving the Church a "good deal."

19. (SBU) Comment: Father Phong was an informative interlocutor who became more animated as the discussion progressed. He acknowledged that Catholic life had been difficult after the war, but said things had improved over the past 10 years. His statement that contemporary Vietnamese society is deteriorating because people say the right things, but do not act on principle or with virtue could be interpreted as an oblique criticism of Vietnam's current political system. Although a priest, Father Phong seemed to place some faith in the "yin" and "yang" of life, and accept that in return for certain freedoms, there would be certain restrictions on the Catholic Church in Khanh Hoa province. YAMAUCHI